

Plant Materials Center Offers Tips for Fall Planting of Native Shrubs

The prime containerized shrub planting season (October through November) is fast approaching for the regions in desert and pinyon-juniper woodlands of New Mexico. This generally is the best time to plant in these areas because the cooler fall air temperatures and lack of wind reduce water use by the plants and allows minimal irrigation to establish the transplant. Additionally, fall soil temperatures are still warm enough to permit substantial root growth that can extend into subsurface moist soil. This root system growth will provide the plant a better chance of surviving the typical hot dry winds and low precipitation the following spring.

There are only a few species of shrubs that may be cost effective to establish by seeding. The two most common species are fourwing saltbush and winterfat. Most other native shrubs have a very slim chance of establishing from seed, and the seed is typically very expensive.

For improved transplanting success, select species and ecotypes that are adapted to your area. The best way to assure this is to use local ecotypes, plants which were originally collected from the area to be planted. If local ecotypes are

not available, try to purchase plants from the Southwest that match the elevation and latitude of your planting site. Ecotype selection can be as critical as species selection.

Any time plants are in leaf, care must be taken in transporting the containerized stock. Transport in a pickup bed can work if the plants are laid down in the bed, are well watered before transport, and if the outside of the pots do not reach temperatures lethal to roots (120° F) from sun exposure. Wind blast should also be minimized (use net coverings or minimize transport time). It is difficult to haul large quantities of plants if they are laid down in a pickup bed because it is difficult to stack the containers to prevent the containers from crushing the stems and leaves of adjacent plants. Covered transport, such as inside a van or an enclosed trailer, is preferable because the plants are protected from sun and wind damage and can remain upright allowing more plants to be transported.

Once you have the transplants at your staging area, keep the soil medium moist by watering as often as necessary (typically daily). It is often easier to store the plants in a shady area to reduce watering needs before planting. The plastic

containers are typically black so they need to be protected from direct sunshine because the container walls can get hot enough to kill roots growing along the inside surface of the pot.

Water is generally the limiting factor reducing plant survival in field plantings in the droughty Southwest. Sometimes, transplants with large root systems are easier to establish. When field planting deeply rooted transplants, embed an irrigation tube with the transplant before backfilling. This will allow for deep watering and encourage continued taproot development. By irrigating subsurface soils and not the ground surface, weed growth is much less likely to compete with the transplant. For more information we would encourage the review of the Los Lunas Plant Materials Center brochure [Guidelines for Planning Riparian Restoration in the Southwest](#) and the Standards and Specifications within the Natural Resources Conservation Service Technical Guide for [Tree and Shrub Plantings](#). Both are available on the New Mexico NRCS website www.nm.nrcs.usda.gov